

THE ROLE OF ULAMA' IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES AMONG THE PEOPLE OF CENTRAL BILAD-AL-SUDAN: THE CASE OF KANEM-BORNO

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to assess the role of Muslim scholars (the Ulama') on the emergence of a definite identity for both the people and the rulers of ancient Kanem-Borno. The polity, which flourished around the basin of Lake Chad, had been ruled by the Saifawa dynasty for over one thousand years before it was replaced by the Al-Kanemi's early in the twentieth century. It is demonstrated that the Kanem-Borno Ulama' had used an in-depth knowledge of history and genealogy in the task of giving the Saifawa legend a scholarly flavour, which has lasted unchallenged for centuries. The Method that was adopted in writing this paper is documentary analysis, using primary and secondary sources. Data collected were critically analysed and interpreted. Findings revealed that The Ulama' have succeeded in forming an identity for the Saifawa ruling dynasty and the Kanuri people linking them to Saif ibn Dhi Yazan and above all, to the Quraish pedigree. In conclusion, this forms the perception of the Kanuri people that they descended from Saif, they were Muslims and of the Quraish family.

KEYWORDS: Borno, Islam, Kanem, Saifawa & Ulama

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INTRODUCTION

One of the major characteristics of Islam is that it is a nation-building religion. Historically, once Islam penetrates an area, there is a tendency for the people to redefine their identity and reconstruct their history. Perhaps this tendency arises from the fact of the religion's universalism, which brings various peoples into a global brotherhood. In such a situation, particularistic identities and histories tend to be irrelevant, or even detrimental to the people's participation in this brotherhood. There is also a tendency for the people who have accepted Islam to try and de-emphasise their *Jahiliyya* past. Moreover, built-in within the religion itself is a general historical schema for mankind, into which every Muslim people must try to fit. Thus, all human beings are the descendants of the Prophet Adam (A.S.), and, after the flood, all the people of the world are the descendants of the survivors. There is, therefore, a general tendency among Muslim communities to try and trace their origins to one or other of the passengers, who were saved in Ark of the Prophet, Noah.

Apart from the religious implications of the origins and identities of people, there are also certain ideological and political interests which have to be catered for in the process of establishing identities. It would be quite embarrassing, for instance, for a people to trace their origin to a source which turns out to be servile. The construction of identities, therefore, requires a thorough knowledge of the general Islamic schema, as well as an intimate knowledge of the most prestigious, probable and acceptable origins. That is to say, a knowledge not only of Islam as a religion, but also of the histories of the Islamic peoples and communities, their heroes, their

achievements, their relations with one another, and of their migrations, is needed. It is also necessary to know the ancient routes, towns, states and empires, and at least the outline of their histories. Histories that were hastily put together without such knowledge tend to exhibit all sorts of absurdities and anachronism. Needless to say, the repositories of such specialised knowledge was the class of *Ulama'*, who alone had access to the necessary information.

The arrival of Islam in the Central *Bilad-al-Sudan* and its gradual spread has led to the gradual disappearance of old, pre-Islamic identities, and the emergence of new nations through the welding together of previous, diverse communities (Alkali; 1978). Even those communities that had successfully resisted Islam have found it expedient to redefine their identities in line with the new movement (Trimingham; 1975). The general reconstruction of identities has led to the emergence of some remarkable histories in our area of study (Hodgkin, 1975; 74–76).

THE CENTRAL *BILAD-AL-SUDAN*

The Central *Bilad-al-Sudan* is favourably located to be the arena for an almost constant process of the transformation of peoples and communities. Comprising of most of what is today considered as Northern Nigeria, plus the southern part of the Republic of Chad and the southern half of the Niger Republic, this sub-region have historically played the role of a point of convergence of peoples (Alkali, (i); 1987). The relative flatness of the terrain, the open parkland, the availability of water and other factors drew people from the south and from the north, but especially from the north, to mingle with the existing stock. Ecological disasters in the north have always led to significant migration southwards to areas of better security (James; 1987). In its turn, such a continuous human mobility has led to a steady process of evolution and the transformation of communities and cultures, and to an equally continuous process of integration in the region.

The area around the Lake Chad was especially suited to attract immigrants, because it afforded access to a reasonable supply of water and fertile soil. This combination was particularly attractive to both settled cultivators and nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists a combination which, with its potential for conflict and co-operation, was particularly conducive to the emergence of a high level of social and political organisation and management. Well-endowed with a network of trade routes connecting the area with North Africa as well as with rest of the Central *Bilad-al-Sudan*, the area saw the emergence of the Kingdom and Empire of Kanem sometime around the ninth century A.D. (Alkali; 1978). Almost immediately after its rise to power, Kanem came into contact with Islam, and finally became an Islamic state with conversion of Mai Hume Jilmi in the eleventh century (Alkali; 1978).

The conversion of Mai Hume Jilmi may be regarded as a point in the gradual penetration and spread of Islam in the area (Lavers, 1985; 18–32). Mai Hume and his immediate successors embarked upon a rapid process of conversion, and, within a short period, there was a large body of Muslims, certainly sufficient to form the nucleus of a recognisable and strong community. Whether the process of re-defining the identity of the rulers of Kanem started at this period, or earlier, is not clear at the present time, given the present extent and level of our knowledge. What is clear is that the emergent identity of the rulers was rooted in Arab-Islamic history.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE KANURI IDENTITY

Borno was a successor to the Kingdom of Kanem, and the founders and nucleus of the Kingdom of Borno where the people are now known as the Kanuri. It is no longer a matter of dispute that the Kanuri are the first Muslim nation in the Central *Bilad-al-Sudan* (Trimingham; 1975). We may even go further and propose that the Kanuri, as Kanuri, have always been a Muslim nation. Traditionally, the Kanuri claim to have always been Muslim, and this claim is still repeated by the ordinary Kanuri man.

The emergence of the Kanuri as a people is closely linked with the rise of the Kingdom of Kanem. This polity emerged out of the fusion of many communities in the area, but its rise started from about the eleventh century when Mai Hume Jilmi officially accepted Islam. Elements that refused to be blended into the new Islamic nation under the Mais continued to give trouble until they brought about the collapse of the Kanem Kingdom (Alkali; 1978). However, the new nation moved out of Kanem along with their leaders to form the Kingdom of Borno. This new nation is the Kanuri nation, and the only identity it ever had was Islamic. In fact, the name Kanuri was only adopted later. All the documents of the early history of Borno refer to them only as Muslims, who were the followers of the descendants of Mai Hume Jilmi (Palmer; 1926).

GROWTH OF THE IDENTITY

While the emergence and growth of Kanem-Borno was a natural historical process, there was clearly a conscious effort to adopt and hold on to a specific tradition of origin, particularly on the part of the rulers. The success which has attended this effort is evident from the fact that there were external references to the Arab-Islamic origin of the rulers of Kanem from a very early date. The occurrence of these external references indicates that the rulers and their propagandists had succeeded in selling the idea even to outsiders.

Thus, while in the ninth century we find Al-Ya'qubi mentioning the Zaghawa (Al-Yaqubi; 1975) in Kanem, living in reed huts under their King called Kakara, this was before the conversion of Mai Hume Jilmi. By the late eleventh century, i.e. after the conversion, we hear from A-Bakri (1975; 88) that:

Beyond the desert of Zuwila, and forty days from this town, is situated the land of Kanem, a race of idolatrous Negroes which it is difficult to visit... It is reported that there exists in the country a community descended from some Umayyads who had escaped there at a time when their family was the subject of Abbasid persecution.

We cannot say for sure if the claim of an Umayyad origin was internally generated. It is certainly not reported in any of our internal sources.

Whatever the case, it is clear that by the time of Al-Bakri, the Muslim community was already becoming differentiated from the rest, and they were identified with the ruling group. It is also clear that this differentiation was leading to the construction of an identity, which linked them to the Islamic heartland. Moreover, those who were establishing the identity were already basing their work on a fact of Islamic history. Only the *Ulama'* would have been conversant with the inter-dynastic squabbles, which led to the overthrow of the Umayyads by the Abbasids, and of the persecution that followed.

By the late fourteenth century, Al-Maqrizi (1975) described all Sudanese (i.e. black people) as being the descendants of Ham, and said that they were divided into twelve tribes. Of these, the "great people" of Kanem were one, and they were "for the most part Muslims" (Al-Maqrizi, 1975; 100–102). It is also from Al-Maqrizi that we first hear of the rulers being descendants of Saif ibn DhiYazan of Himyar (Al-Maqrizi, 1975; 100–102). There are at least two significant points here. Firstly, by the late fourteenth century, the Muslims predominated in Kanem. That is to say that the new nation that was later to be called the Kanuri had taken root. However there were still a significant proportion of the people that remained unconverted. Those would continue to maintain their old identities, i.e. the remnants of the Zaghawa, Bulala and so on. The second point is that here, we come across the name of Saif ibn DhiYazan, who is also mentioned in the internal sources as the founder of the ruling dynasty, the Saifawa. It is significant that Al-Maqrizi has given two separate identities here: one for the people and the other for the rulers.

This device is not peculiar to Al-Maqrizi. The legend of Daura does the same for the Hausa nation (Palmer; 1926). In the case of Kanem-Borno, it is interesting to note that Ham is presented by Al-Maqrizi as the ancestor of the Sudanese (i.e. Blacks), with all that this implies. The descendants of Ham, especially through Fut, were more or less damned. However, the rulers were the off spring of the popular Yamani hero, Saif ibn DhiYazan of Himyar. It is as if, in this legend, an ideological foundation is being laid for the justification of the rule of the Saifawa. A Yamani hero, being Arab, was justified in ruling the children of Fut. In the legend of Daura, the Hausa people are given a Canaanite origin, while the rulers descended from a Baghdadi prince (i.e. an Abbasid). But this is an external source. If there was any ulterior (e.g. racist) motive for constructing such a system, it evidently (and understandably) failed to take internal root, as we have no internal source in Borno making the above distinction.

One of the first internal written sources that we have, in which, reference is made to origin is a letter from Mai UthmanBiri ibn Idriss to Al-ZahirSaif-al-Din Barquq, the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, sent in 1391–2 (794 A.H.). This letter and its contents have reached us through the pen of Al-Qalqashandi (Al- Qalqashandi, 1975; 77–78). He reports that Mai Uthman claimed to have descended fromSaif ibn DhiYazan,

But he gave the genealogy incorrectly, for he said also that he was Quraish, which is an error, for Saif ibn DhiYazan descended from the Tubba's of Yemen, who were Himyarites (Al- Qalqashandi, 1975; 77–78).

Such a slip was not made by the Mai himself, for what the letter actually said was:

We are the sons of Saif ibn DhiYazan, the father of our tribe, the Arab of the family of Quraish, *as we have been informed by our learned men* (Al- Qalqashandi, 1975; 77–78).

This is perhaps the first and only slip we find in the genealogy of the Saifawa, and it persisted down to the time of Imam Ahmad ibn Fartuwa. It is possible that Al-Qalqashandi'scriticism had reached Borno, for we find a particular insistence on the defence of the Quraishi origin, which, perhaps, indicates a conscious hair-splitting effort to overcome the slip by making it accepted.

Going down to the sixteenth century in Borno, we find ibn Fartuwa giving the tradition in its mature form, even citing written sources in an attempt to prove it correct. After establishing the *nasab* of his Sultan, Mai Idris ibn Ali (nicknamed Alauma) he proceeds to defend it in this way: in a book called *Ifrikiyya*, the author states that the people of Himyar, son of Ghalib, were successors of BaniHashim. It is also stated in the same source that Himyar was the brother of Luwayy ibn Ghalib, and Luwayy was the ancestor of the Quraish (Fartuwa, 1975; 77–78). This is a clear attempt to clear the problem created by Al-Qalqashandi's comment that Saif ibn DhiYazan was of Himyar, and not of Quraish. Ibn Fartuwa is here trying to show that, afterall, theQuraish were related to Himyar! He does not stop there (Fartuwa, 1975; 77–78):

Let him who reflects take heed to the words we have quoted from the book *Ifrikiyya* and the book *Futuhu Sham*, that he may know the ancestry of our Sultan AlhajjIdris ibn Ali. for he is of the exalted race. Truly his descent is traced back to the Quraish and such is not the case with many people.

He was, indeed, a consummate polemicist. He was clearly alluding to the fact that the Mamluke Sultans of Egypt at the time, being of servile origin, could not be compared with his noble master.

The Kanuri tradition is clearly structured in such a way as to link the people with the Islamic milieu. Even Saif, a pre-Islamic figure, is linked to Islam in two ways. Firstly he is linked to Quraish, the tribe of the Prophet (S.A.W.).

Secondly, we find ibn Fartuwa stating that “one of the Kings of Yaman named Saif ibn DhiYazan foretold our Prophet’s coming, since God inspired him with mature wisdom so to do”. The tradition clearly succeeded in differentiating the Muslims from the rest of the communities in Kanem, and later, in Borno. The rulers were also, thus, able to assume a universalist legitimacy, transcending tribal and clan identity which could prove detrimental to national integration. The tradition also gave the rulers the right (even the duty) to expand to other territories. As an Islamic state, it became their duty to expand *dar-al-Islam* through *jihad*. Islam and the new *nasab*, therefore, laid the foundation for the emergence and expansion of Kanem and Borno.

By tracing only, the descent of the rulers and leaving the people simply as Muslims. Sometimes, documents refer to them as “people of Kanem”, or “people of Borno”, but more often as “the Muslims”. Room is left for the absorption of other communities who, one way or another, got drawn into the orbit of Saifawa authority. The establishment of the *nasab* of the rulers, and linking them with the tribe of the Prophet (S.A.W.) also served a political purpose. It gave the dynasty a legitimacy which could not be assailed in an Islamic setting: the Sunni tradition being that the Caliph should come from among the Quraish (Tamara; 309–324).

In international relations, the use of this *nasab* is demonstrated in the letter from Mai Uthman ibn Biri to Sultan Barquq: Muslims led by the descendants of Saif ibn DhiYazan, who was of Quraish, should not be raided for slaves. That the *Ulama'* in Egypt found faults with this genealogy perhaps partly accounts for Ibn Fartuwa’s broadside many generations later. That broadside, quoted above, seems to be saying that Sultan Barquq, a slave of the Turks, was not the right person to challenge the nobility of the Saifawa.

Alkali has demonstrated the complicated politics that took place among the Islamic states forming the triangle of Borno-Ottoman-Sa’adi spheres. Each of these polities was ruled by dynasties which either forcibly or tacitly laid claim to the leadership of the Islamic world. The Ottomans were the *de facto* rulers of most of the Islamic world at the time, but, ideologically, they were disadvantaged in *nasab*. The Sa’adis of Morocco, claiming a *Sharriifian* origin, regarded themselves as the rightful rulers, but was hard-put to it to establish an undisputed, direct link with the Prophet (S.A.W.). Borno, needing help from both, presented a silent claim. Their *nasab* was clear enough to establish their claim to leadership, but vague enough to escape too close a scrutiny. They succeeded in making both the Ottomans and the Sa’adis uneasy, and managed to get what they wanted (Alkali; 1987).

CONCLUSIONS

The *Ulama'* using ancient sources before them, those written by Arab travellers, geographers and merchants, have succeeded in formulating a genealogical explanation that forms the origin and identity of the Seifawa ruling family and that of the Kanuri people connecting themselves to form part and parcel of universal Islamic civilisation. It is not suggested here that the identities of the Kanuri and of their rulers were deliberately created to achieve these ends, but the fact that the people came to accept these identities and also used them effectively is a tribute to the skills and knowledge of their *Ulama'*. As the late Professor Abdullahi Smith said, even if the Kanuri were not the actual descendants of the Arabs, they certainly became their spiritual heirs. The *Ulama'* have tried to support their claim in terms of the origin and identity of the Seifawa as a ruling dynasty and the Kanuri as a people. Even though there has been disagreement among the *Ulama'*, this claim has been widely popularised. Whether one agrees with the position postulated by the *Ulama'* of Borno or not, the Kanuris contend with the position and built their perception of

descending from Saif ibn Dhi Yazan of Quraishi pedigree and of being Muslims for long period of time, probably the first Islamised state in the Central *Bilad al-Sudan*.

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